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Beatty et al.

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(54) **PRINthead WITH A FLUID CHANNEL THEREthrough**

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(51) **Int. Cl.**⁷ **B41J 2/05**

(52) **U.S. Cl.** **347/63; 347/65**

(58) **Field of Search** 347/62, 63, 65, 347/67

(57) **ABSTRACT**

A printhead has a substrate with a first surface, an opposite substantially parallel second surface, and an edge surface extending from the first surface to the second surface. The substrate further includes a fluid channel that extends from the edge surface inward away from the edge surface and through a recess in the first surface. The printhead further has a heating element disposed over the first surface, and a firing chamber disposed over the heating element. The fluid channel directs fluid to the firing chamber through the recess, where the fluid is heated by the heating element and ejected therefrom.

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6 Claims, 4 Drawing Sheets

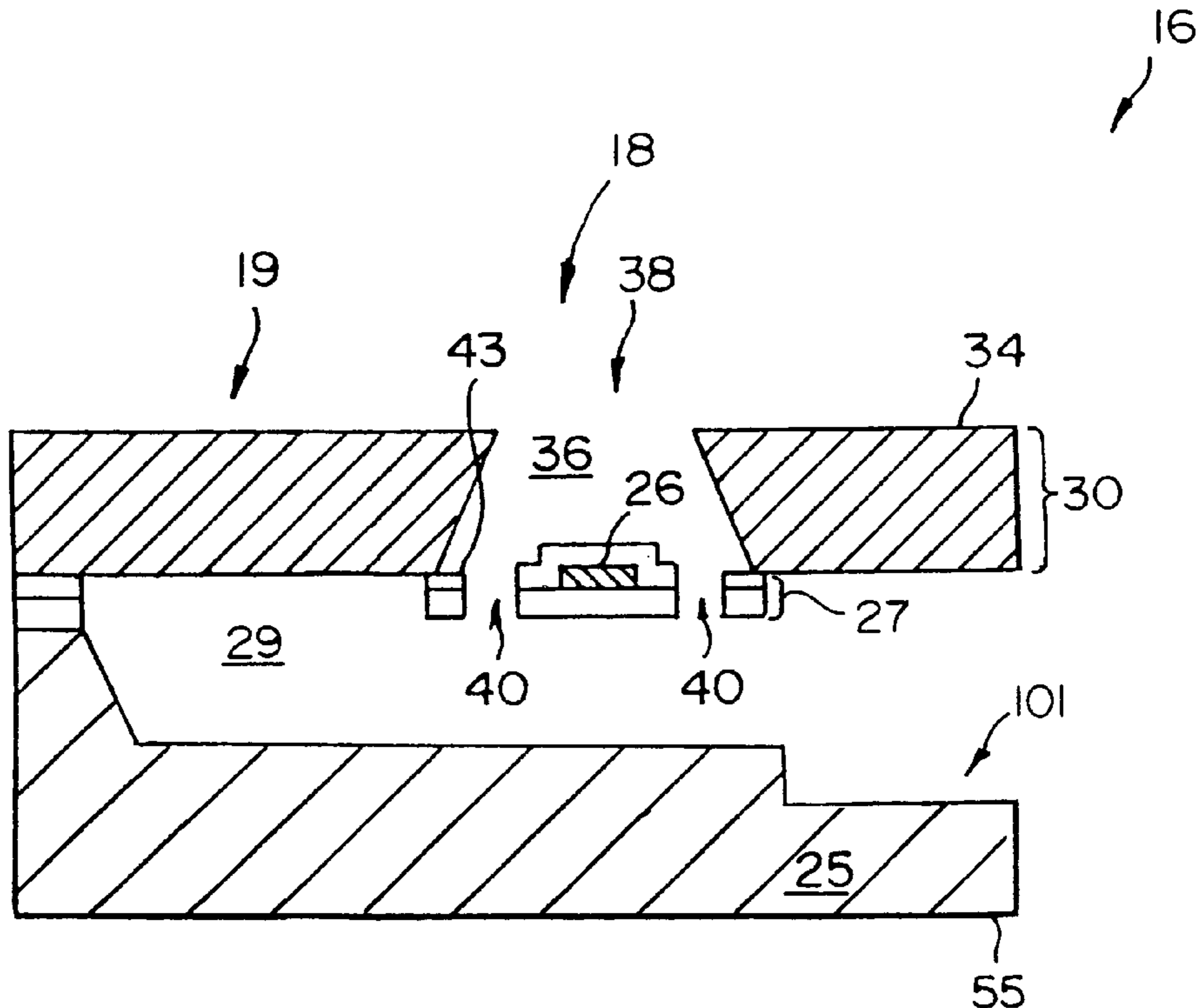


FIG. 1

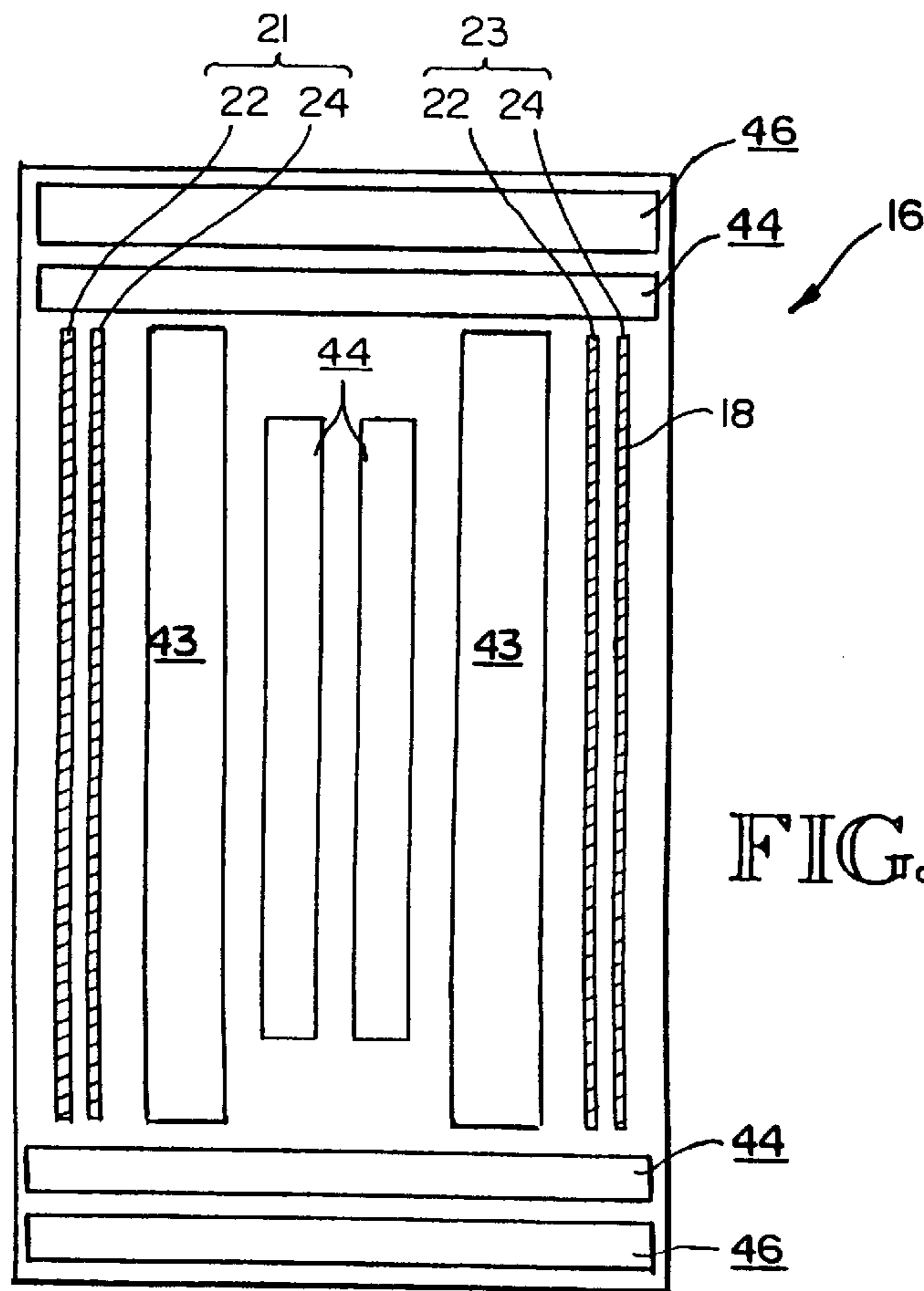
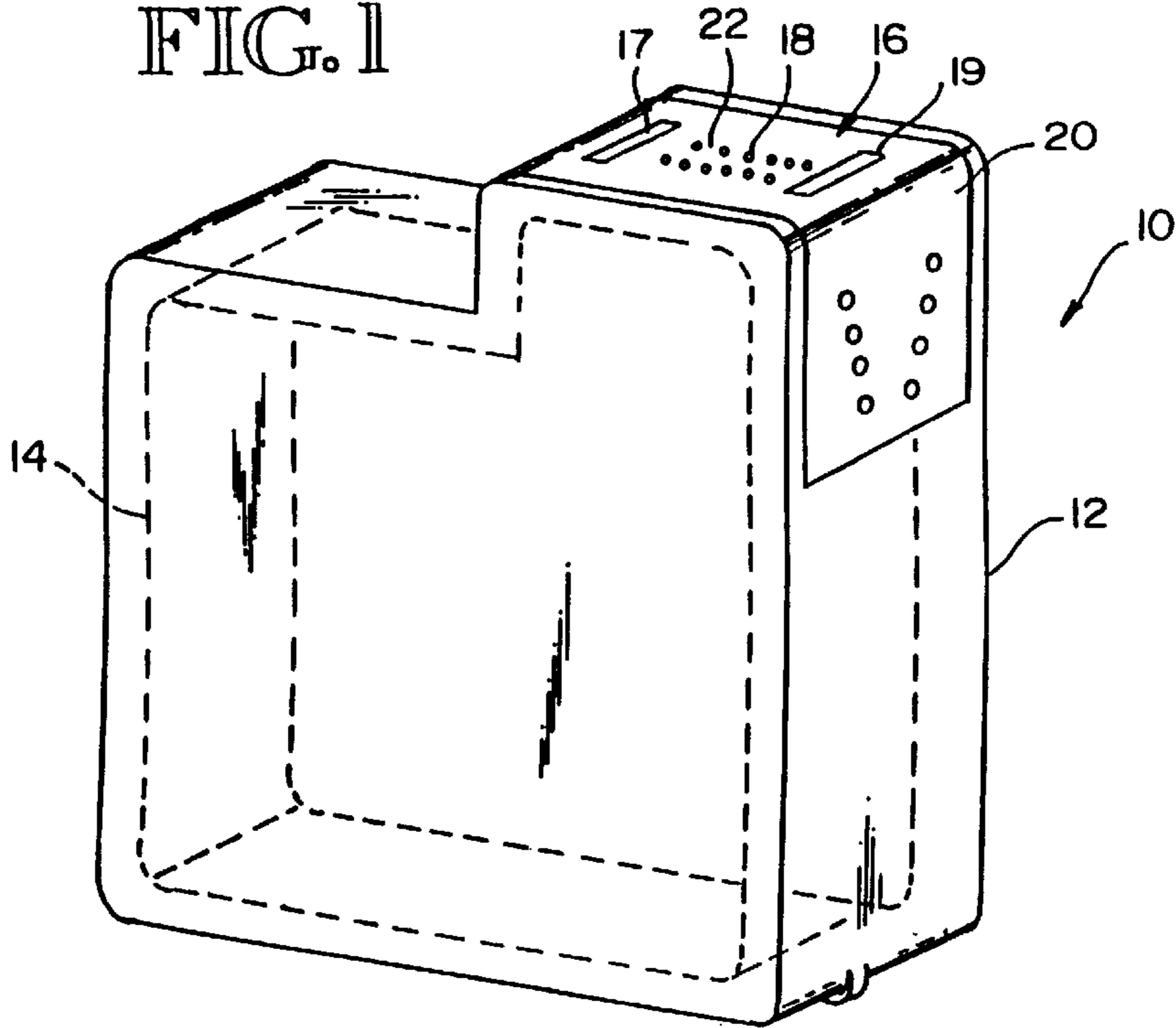


FIG. 2

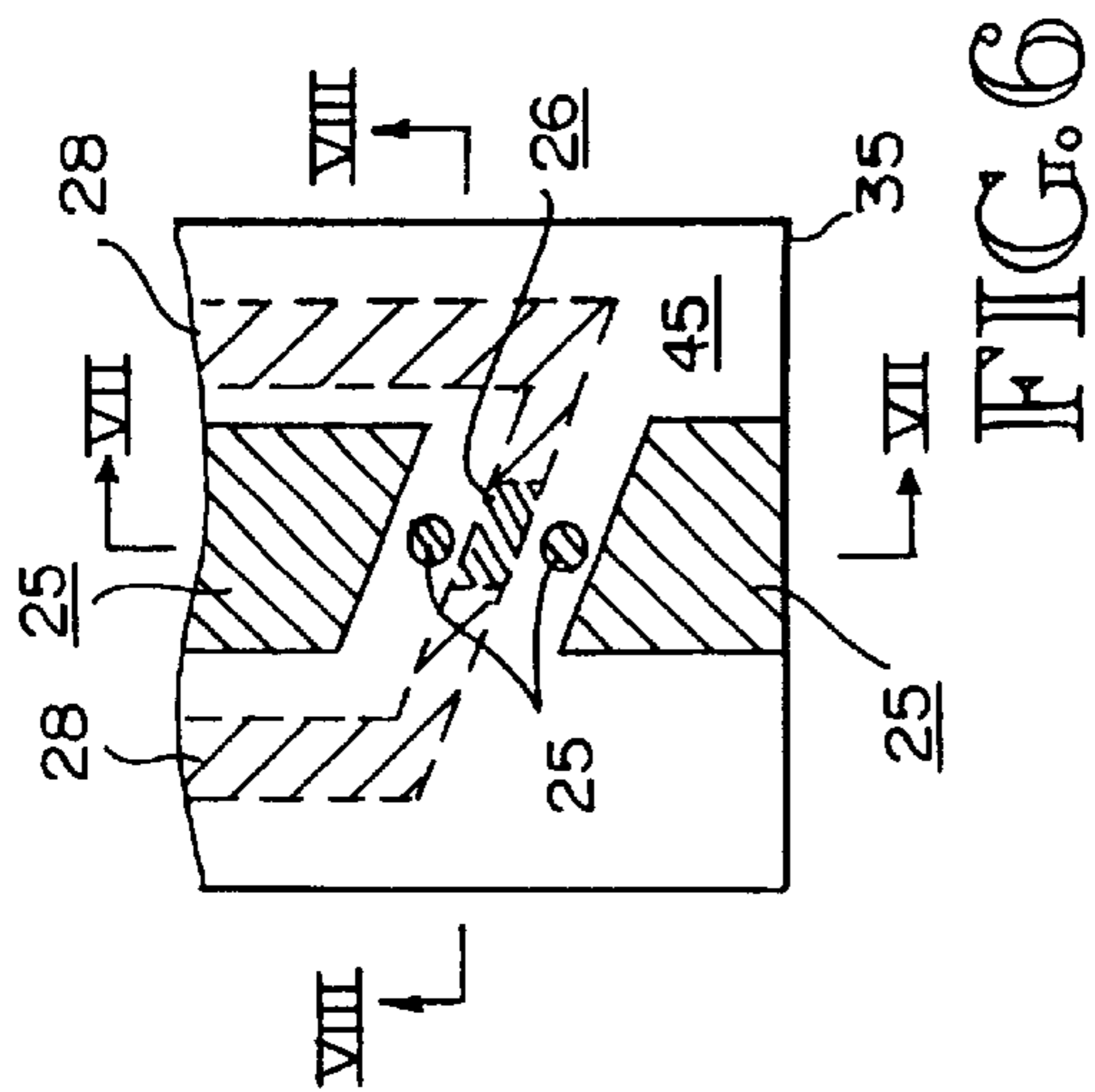


FIG. 6

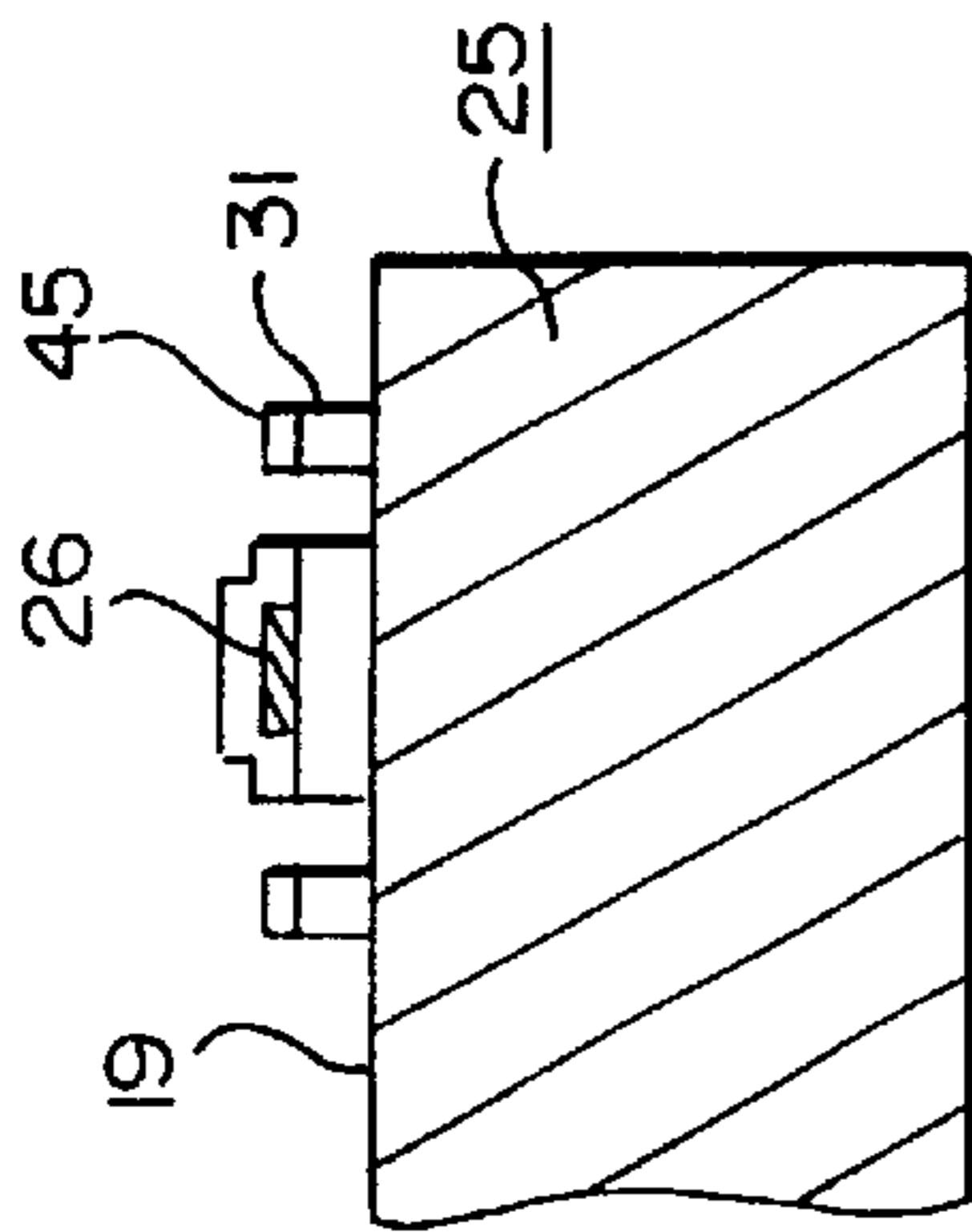


FIG. 7

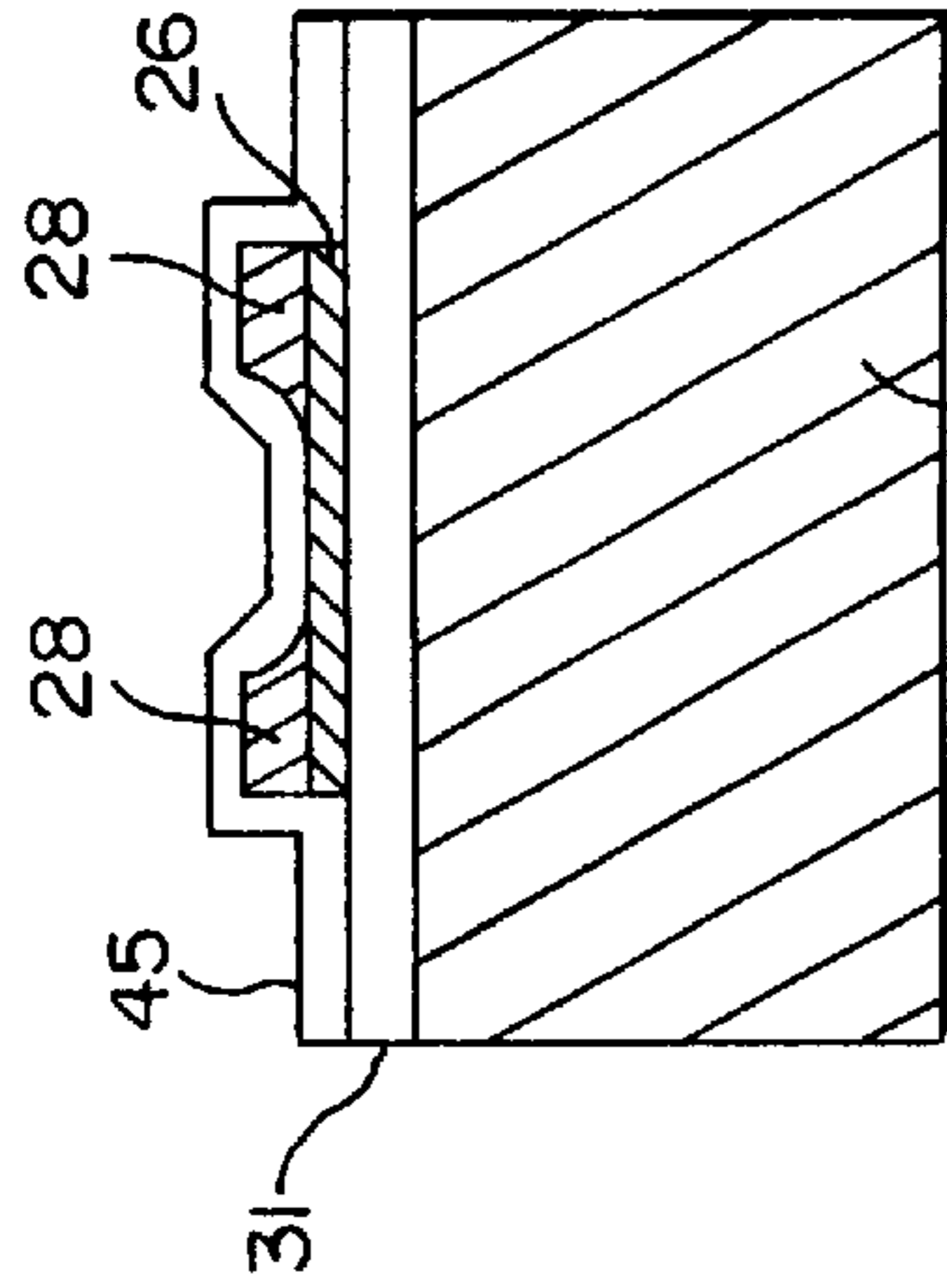


FIG. 8

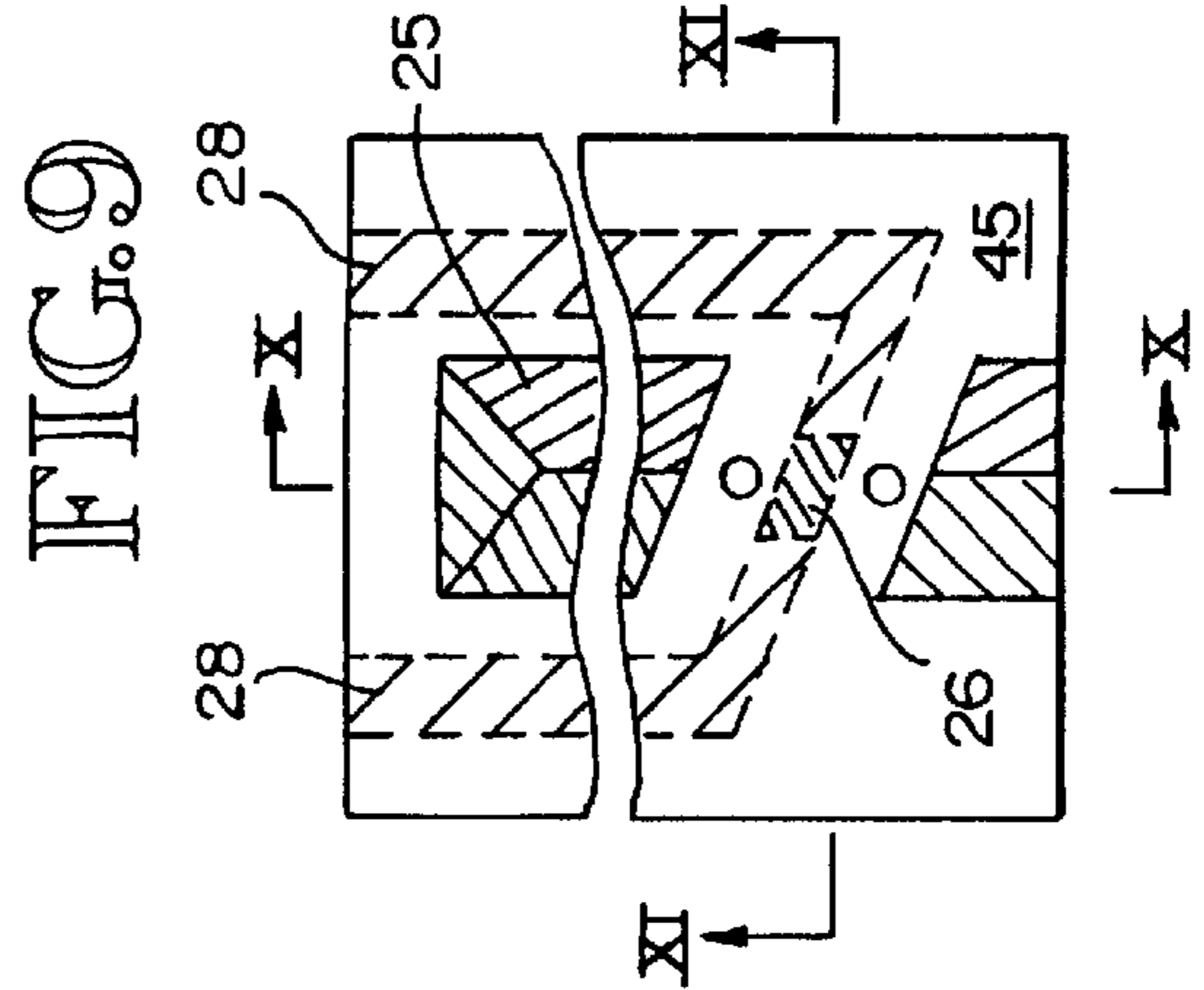


FIG. 9

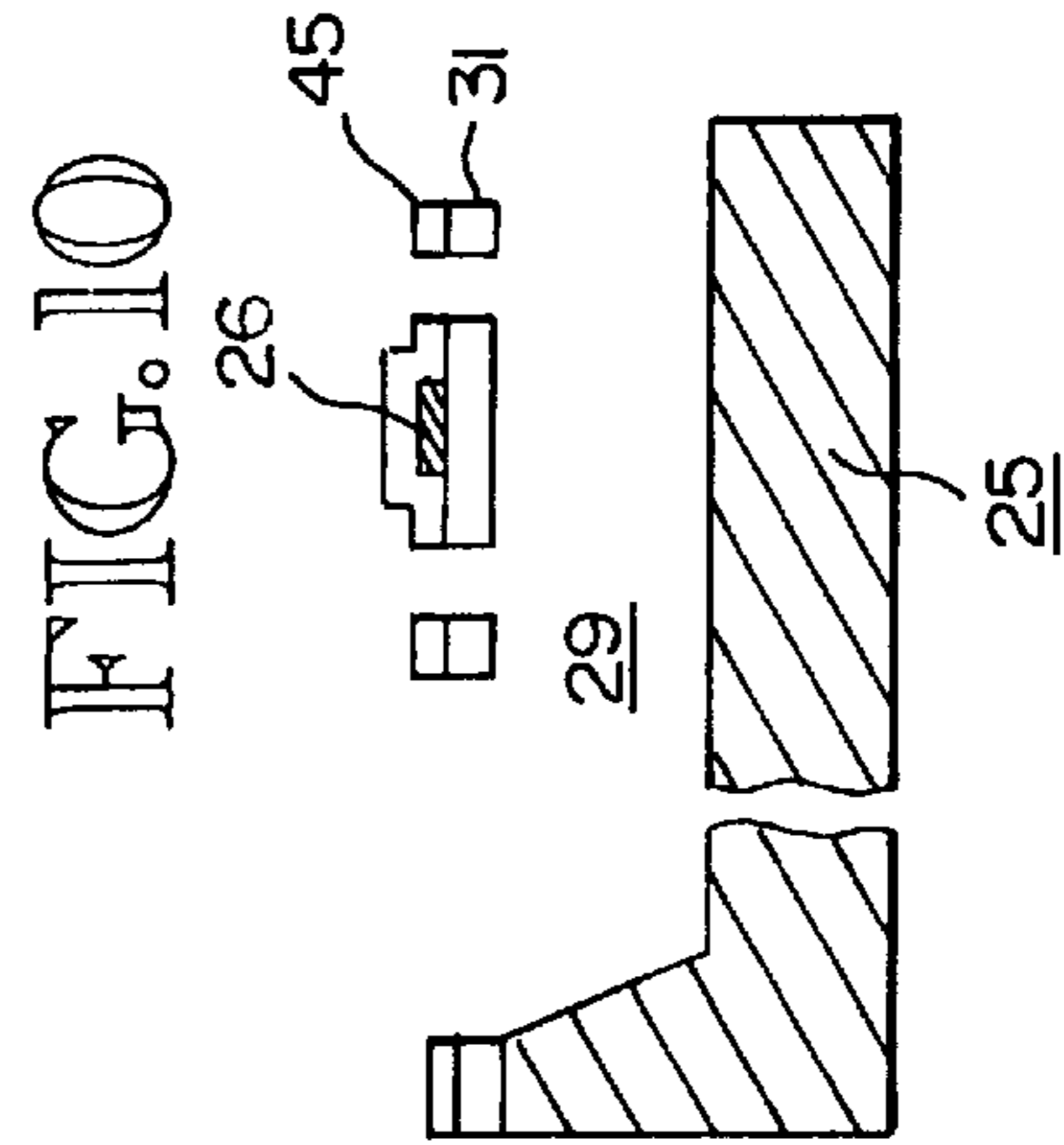


FIG. 10

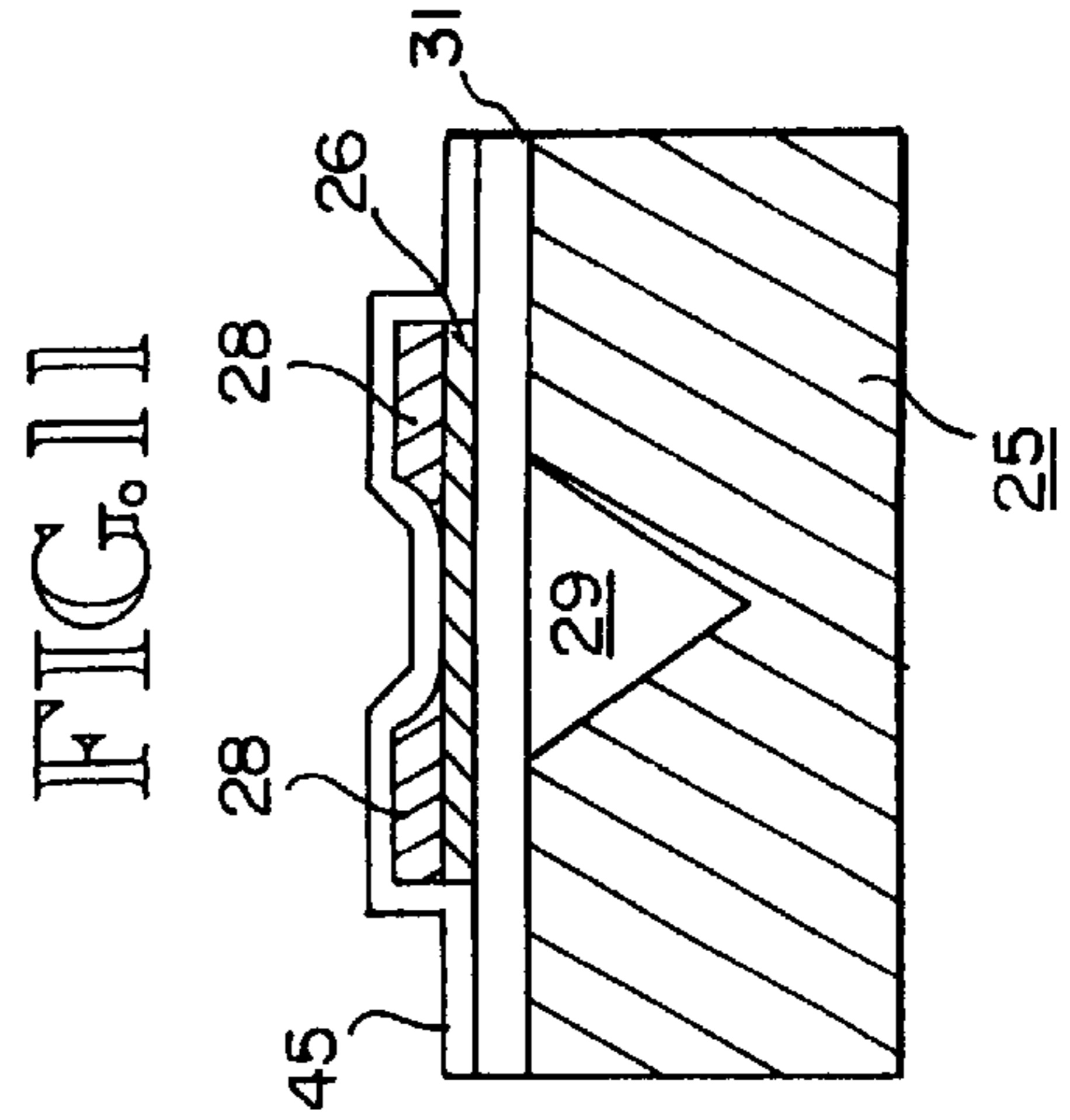


FIG. 11

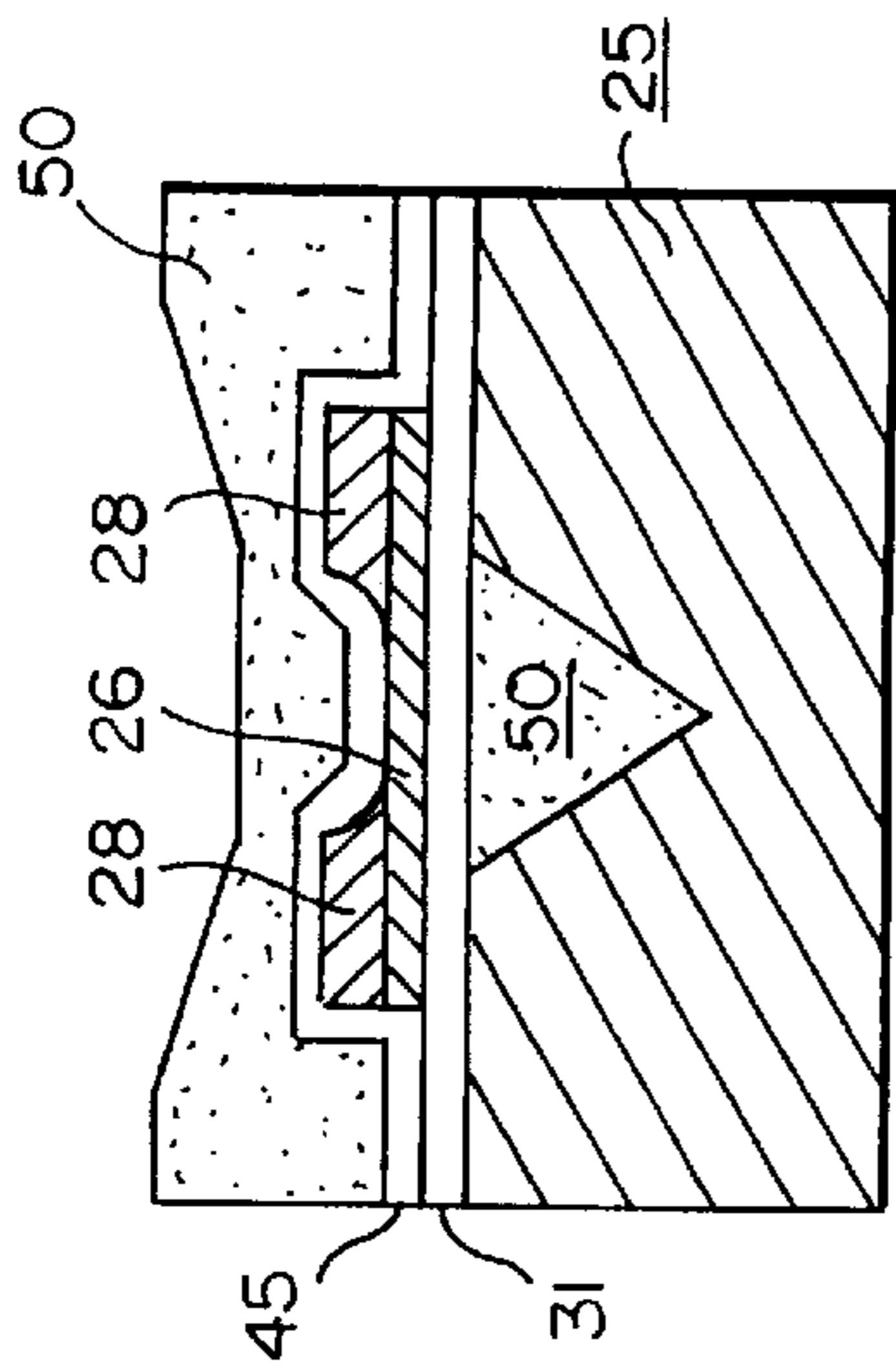


FIG. 12

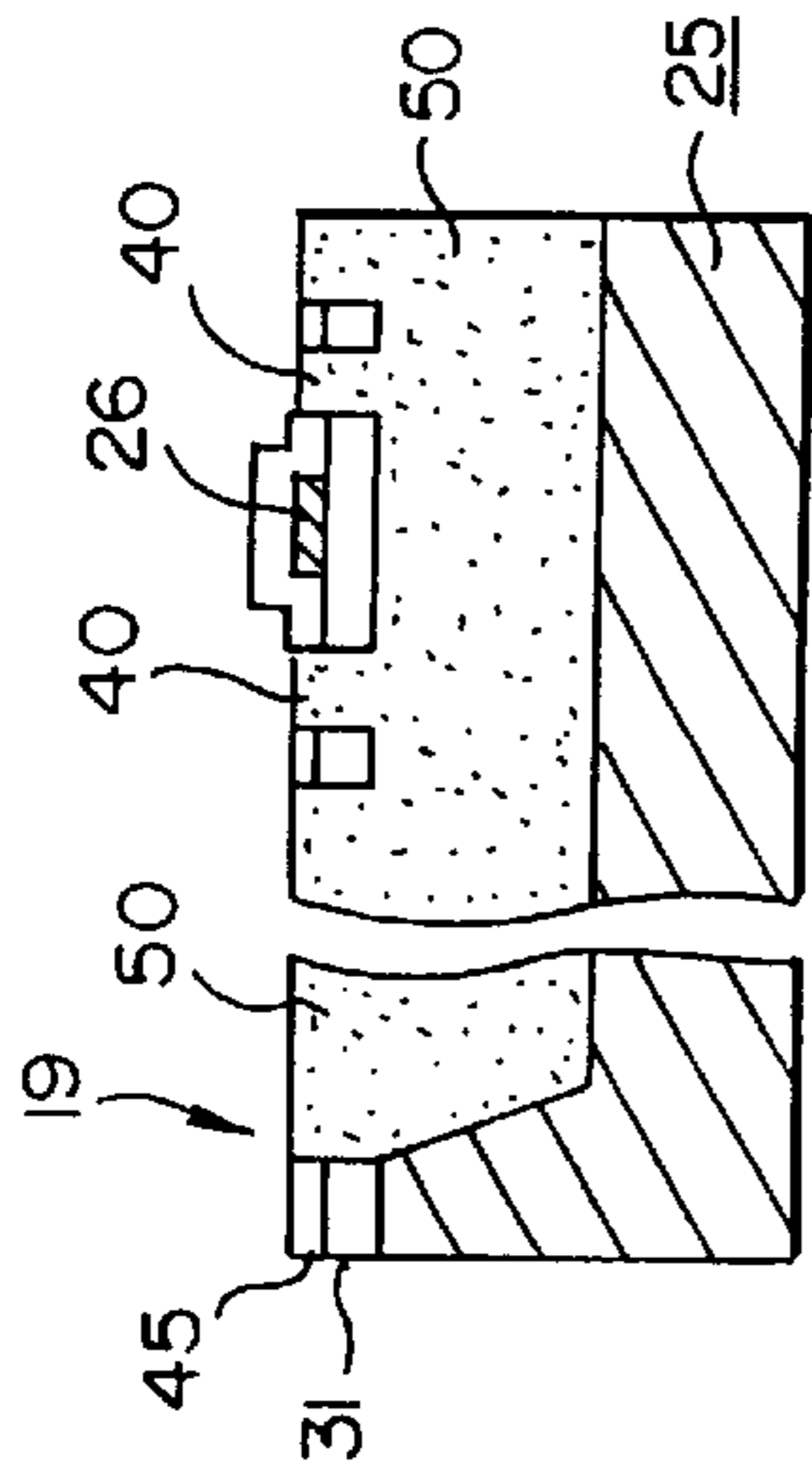


FIG. 13

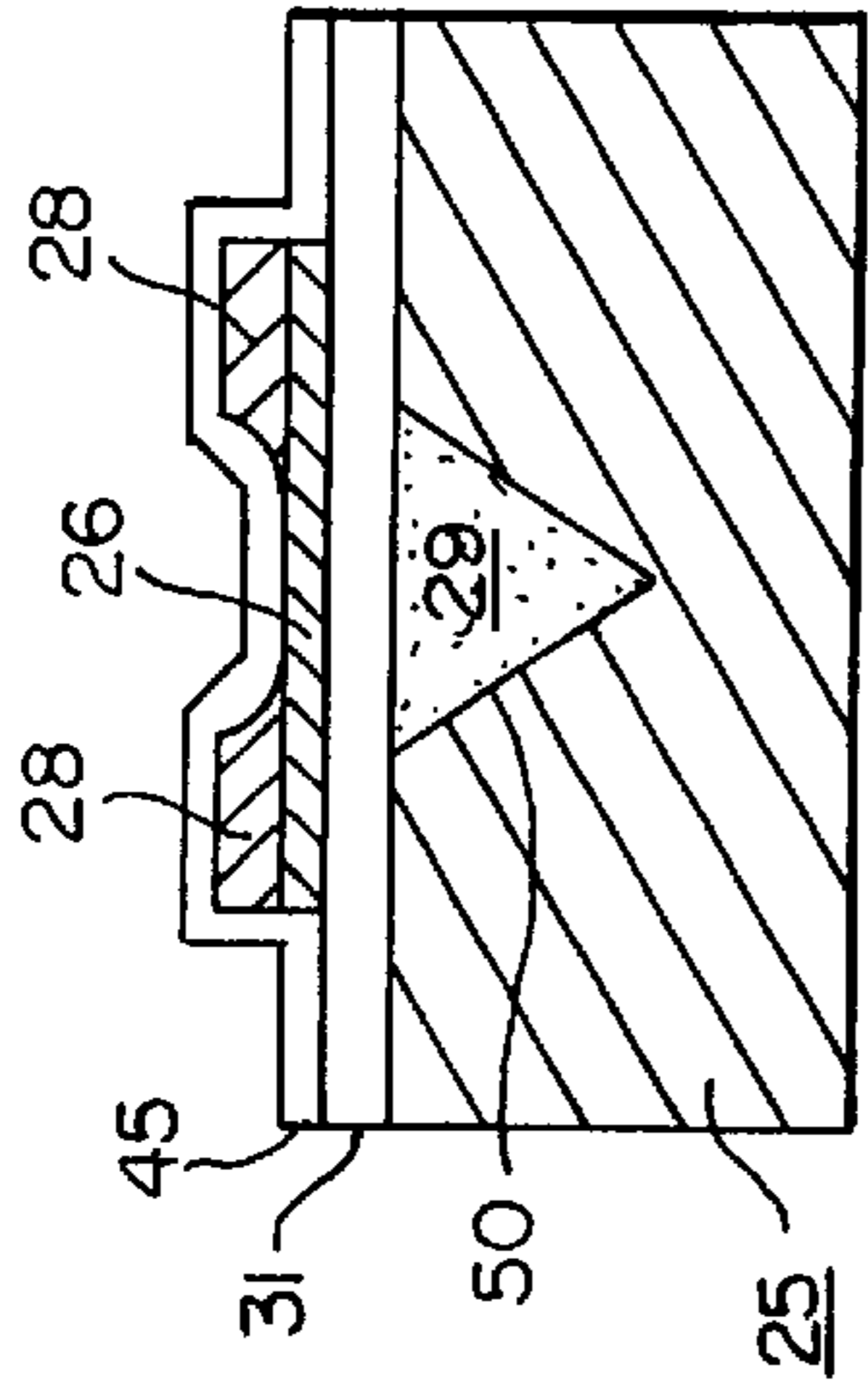


FIG. 14

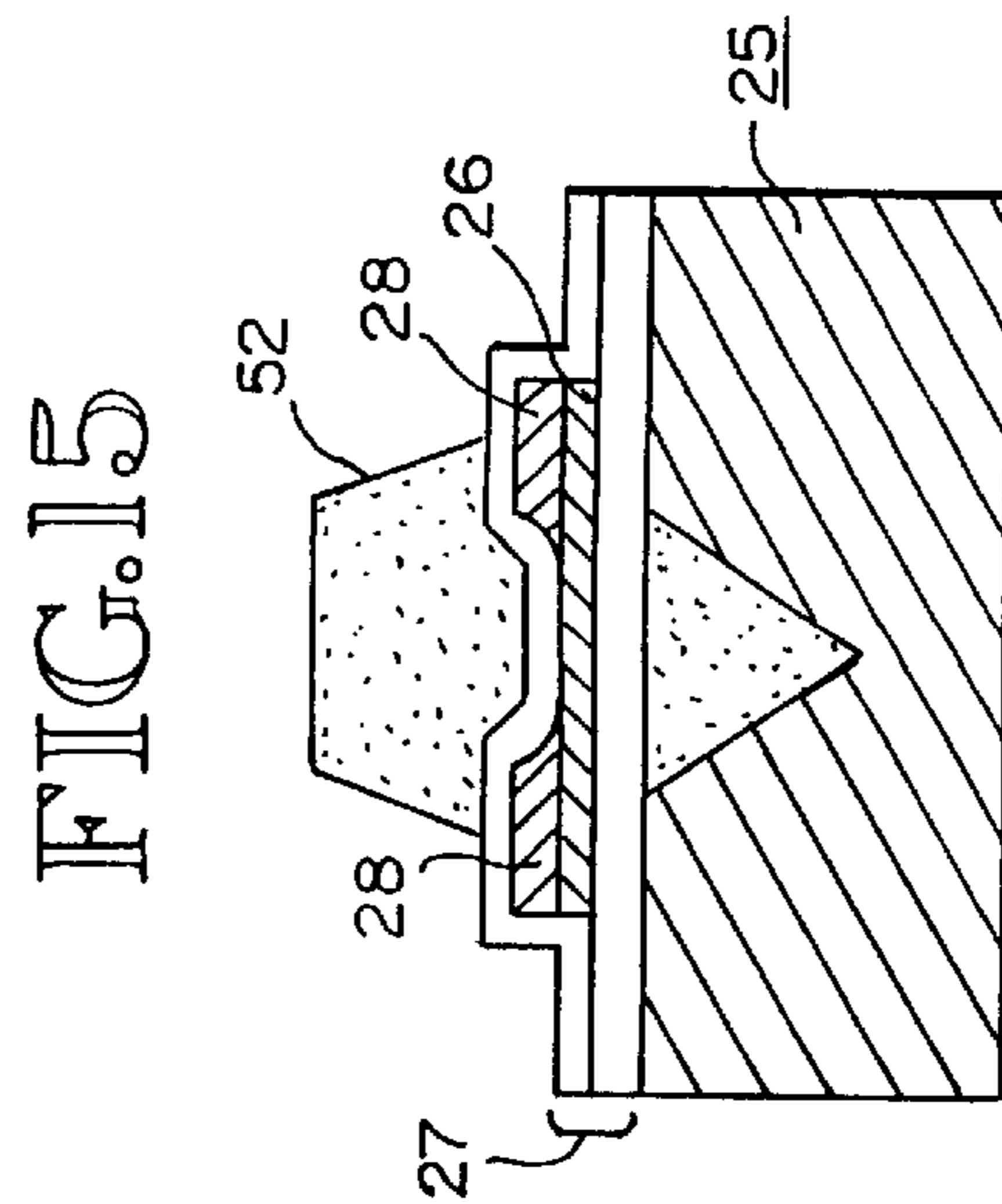


FIG. 15

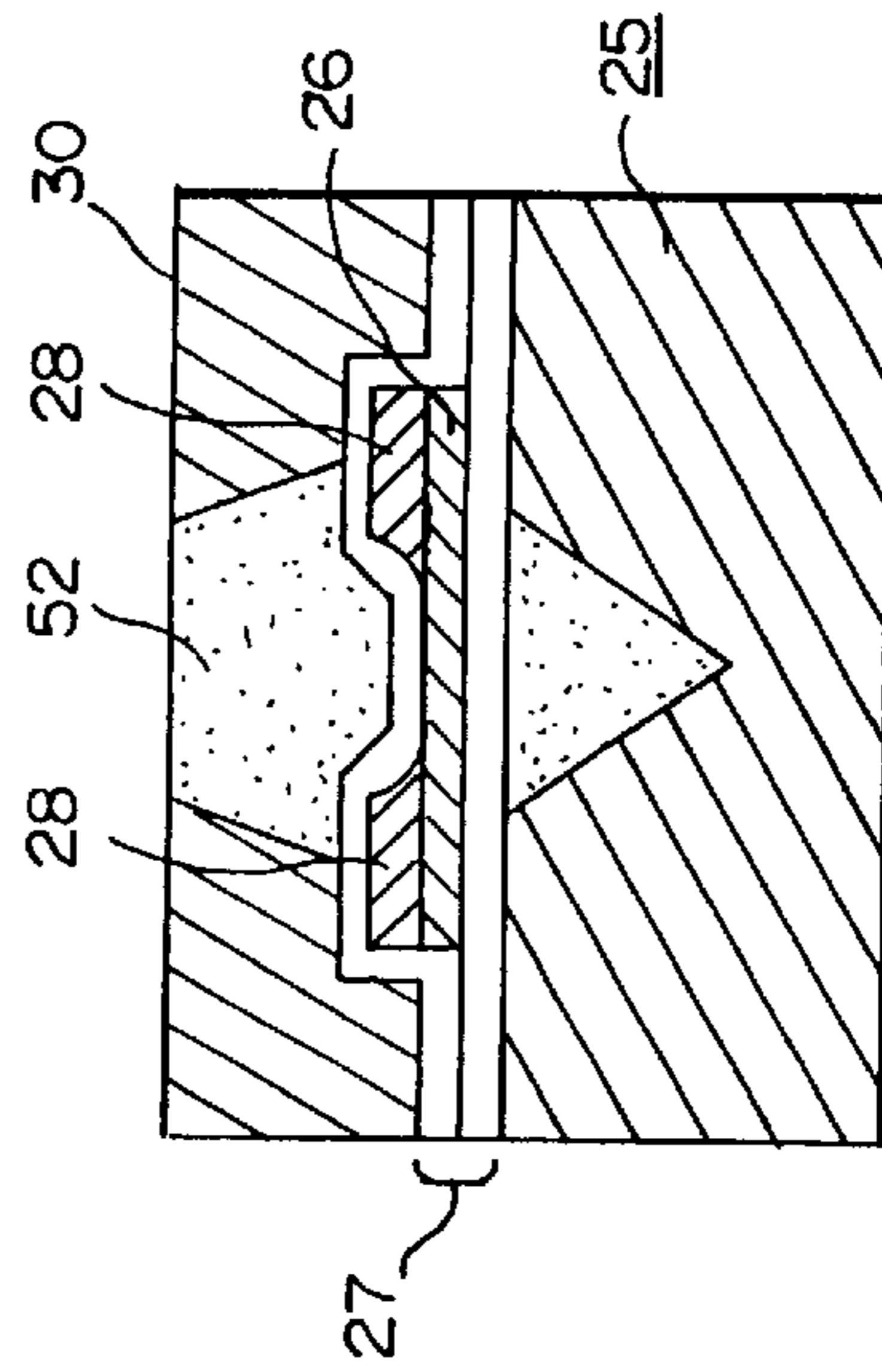


FIG. 16

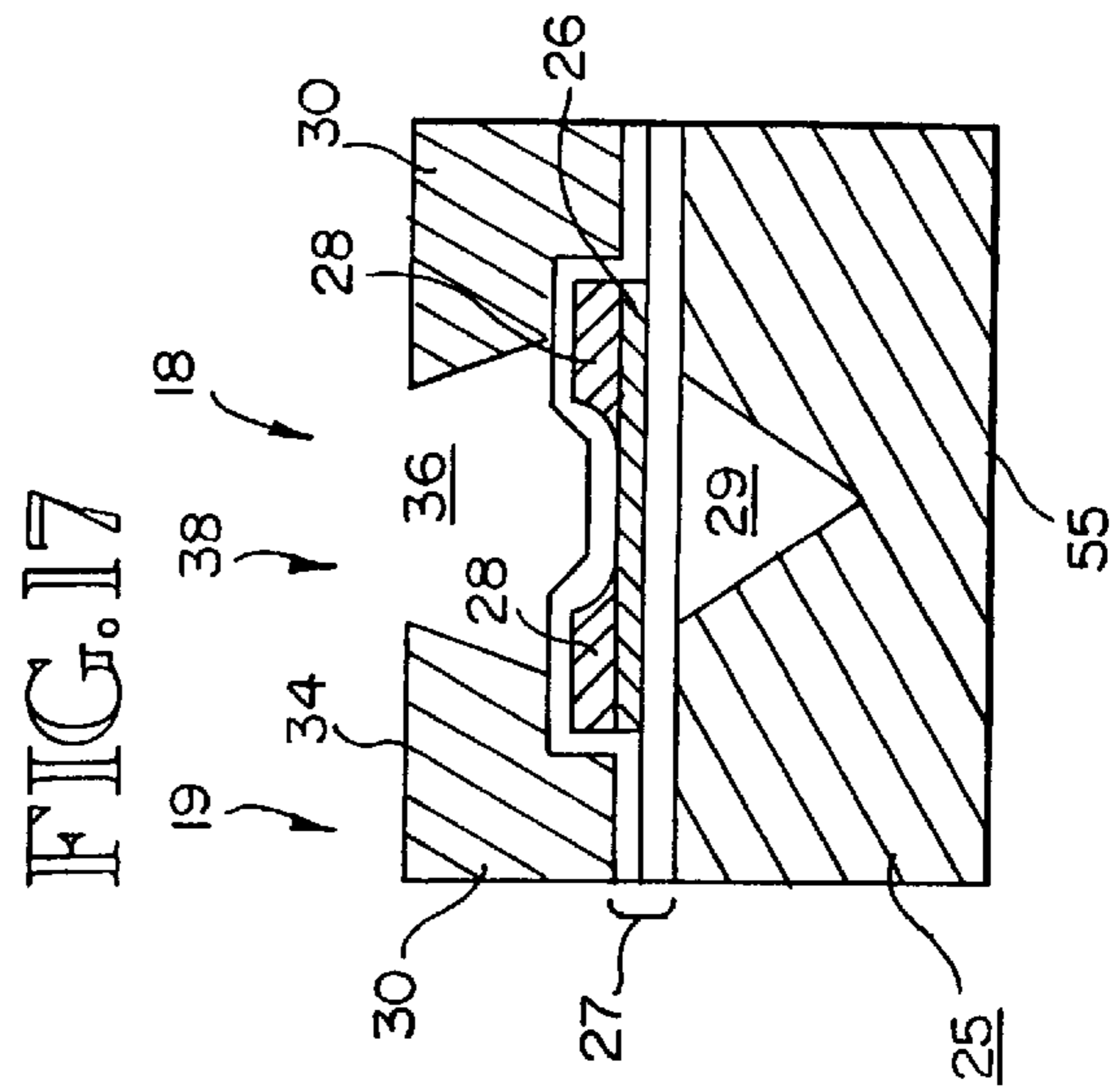


FIG. 17

PRINthead WITH A FLUID CHANNEL THERETHROUGH

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

This invention relates generally to inkjet printhead fabrication processes and more particularly to methods for fabricating fully integrated inkjet printheads on a substrate.

There are known and available commercial printing devices such as computer printers, graphics plotters and facsimile machines which employ inkjet technology, such as inkjet pens. An inkjet pen typically includes an ink reservoir and an array of inkjet printing elements. The array is formed by an inkjet printhead. Each printing element includes a nozzle chamber, a firing resistor and a nozzle opening. Ink is stored in the reservoir and passively loaded into respective firing chambers of the printhead via an ink refill channel and respective ink feed channels. Capillary action moves the ink from the reservoir through the refill channel and ink feed channels into the respective firing chambers. Printer control circuitry outputs respective signals to the printing elements to activate corresponding firing resistors. In response an activated firing resistor heats ink within the surrounding nozzle chamber causing an expanding vapor bubble to form. The bubble forces ink from the nozzle chamber out the nozzle opening. An orifice plate adjacent to the barrier layer defines the nozzle openings. The geometry of the nozzle chamber, ink feed channel and nozzle opening defines how quickly a corresponding nozzle chamber is refilled after firing.

To achieve high quality printing ink drops or dots are accurately placed at desired locations at designed resolutions. Printing at resolutions of 300 dots per inch and 600 dots per inch is known. Higher resolutions also are being sought.

A monolithic structure for an inkjet printhead is described in copending U.S. patent application Ser. No. 08/597,746 filed Feb. 7, 1996 for "Solid State Ink Jet Print Head and Method of Manufacture." The process described therein includes photoimaging techniques similar to those used in semiconductor device manufacturing. The printing elements of a monolithic printhead are formed by applying layers to a silicon die. The firing resistors, wiring lines and nozzle chambers are formed by applying various passivation, insulation, resistive and conductive layers on the silicon die. Such layers are referred to collectively as a thin film structure. An orifice plate overlays the thin film structure opposite the die. Nozzle openings are formed in the orifice plate in alignment with the nozzle chambers and firing resistors. The geometry of the orifice openings affect the size, trajectory and speed of ink drop ejection. Orifice plates often are formed of nickel and fabricated by lithographic and electroforming processes.

SUMMARY

In one embodiment of the present invention, a printhead has a substrate with a first surface, an opposite substantially parallel second surface, and an edge surface extending from the first surface to the second surface. The substrate further includes a fluid channel that extends from the edge surface inward away from the edge surface and through a recess in the first surface. The printhead further has a heating element disposed over the first surface, and a firing chamber disposed over the heating element. The fluid channel directs fluid to the firing chamber through the recess, where the fluid is heated by the heating element and ejected therefrom.

These and other aspects and advantages of the invention will be better understood by reference to the following

detailed description taken in conjunction with the accompanying drawings.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

FIG. 1 is a perspective view of an inkjet pen having a printhead fabricated according to an embodiment of this invention;

FIG. 2 is a block diagram of an embodiment of the inkjet printhead;

FIG. 3 is a partial cross-sectional view of an embodiment of the inkjet printhead fabricated according to one methodology of this invention;

FIG. 4 is a partial plan view of one embodiment of a die having a patterned layer of field oxide;

FIG. 5 is a cross-sectional view taken along line V—V of FIG. 4;

FIG. 6 is a partial plan view of a printhead in one process embodiment with the thin film structure layers applied and patterned;

FIG. 7 is a cross-sectional view along line VII—VII of FIG. 6;

FIG. 8 is a cross-sectional view along line VIII—VIII of FIG. 6;

FIG. 9 is a partial plan view of a printhead in another process embodiment with the feed channel and fill channels etched out of the die;

FIG. 10 is a cross-sectional view along line X—X of FIG. 9;

FIG. 11 is a cross-sectional view along line XI—XI of FIG. 9;

FIG. 12 is a partial cross-sectional view of a printhead in process with filler material added to the structure of FIG. 9;

FIG. 13 is a partial cross-sectional view of a printhead in process after polishing and a plasma etching the structure of FIG. 12;

FIG. 14 is another partial cross-sectional view of a printhead in process after polishing and a plasma etching the structure of FIG. 12;

FIG. 15 is a partial cross-sectional view of a printhead in process after applying a sacrificial mandrel to the structure of FIGS. 13 and 14;

FIG. 16 is a partial cross-sectional view of a printhead in process after applying an orifice plate around the sacrificial mandrel of FIG. 15; and

FIG. 17 a partial cross-sectional view of a completed printhead with the sacrificial mandrel of FIG. 15 and filler material removed.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

Overview

FIG. 1 shows a scanning-type thermal inkjet pen 10 according to an embodiment of this invention. The pen 10 is formed by a pen body 12, an internal reservoir 14 and a printhead 16. The pen body 12 serves as a housing for the reservoir 14. The reservoir 14 is for storing ink to be ejected from the printhead 16 onto a media sheet. The printhead 16 defines an array 22 of printing elements 18 (i.e., nozzle array). The nozzle array 22 is formed on a die. The reservoir 14 is in physical communication with the nozzle array enabling ink to flow from the reservoir 14 into the printing elements 18. Ink is ejected from a printing element 18 through an opening toward a media sheet to form dots on the media sheet.

The openings are formed in an orifice layer. In one embodiment the orifice layer is a plate attached to the underlying layers. In another embodiment the orifice layer is formed integrally with the underlying layers. In an exemplary embodiment of a printhead having an orifice plate, openings also are formed in a flex circuit **20**. The flex circuit **20** is a printed circuit made of a flexible base material having multiple conductive paths and a peripheral connector. Conductive paths run from the peripheral connector to the nozzle array **22**. The flex circuit **20** is formed from a base material made of polyimide or other flexible polymer material (e.g., polyester, poly-methyl-methacrylate) and conductive paths made of copper, gold or other conductive material. The flex circuit **20** with only the base material and conductive paths is available from the 3M Company of Minneapolis, Minn. The nozzle openings and peripheral connector then are added. The flex circuit **20** is coupled to off-circuit printer control electronics via an edge connector or button connector. Windows **17**, **19** within the flex circuit **20** facilitate mounting of the printhead **16** to the pen **10**. During operation signals are received from the printer control circuitry and activate select printing elements **18** to eject ink at specific times causing a pattern of dots to be output onto a media sheet. The pattern of dots forms a desired symbol, character or graphic.

Although a scanning-type inkjet pen is shown in FIG. 1, the fabrication processes for the printhead **16** to be described below also apply to printheads for a wide-array printhead, such as a non-scanning page-wide array printhead.

As shown in FIG. 2, the printhead **16** includes multiple rows of printing elements **18**. In the embodiment shown two rows **22**, **24** form one set of rows **21**, while another two rows **22**, **24** form another set of rows **23**. In alternative embodiments fewer or more rows are included. Associated with each printing element **18** is a driver for generating the current level to achieve the desired power levels for heating the element's firing resistor (or heating element). Also included is logic circuitry for selecting which printing element is active at a given time. Driver arrays **43** and logic arrays **44** are depicted in block format. The firing resistor (or heating element) of a given printing element is connected to a driver by a wiring line. Also included in the printhead **16** are contacts pad arrays **46** for electrically coupling the integrated portion of the printhead to a flex circuit or to off-pen circuitry.

FIG. 3 shows a printing element **18** of a printhead **16**. The printhead includes a silicon die **25**, a thin film structure **27** and an orifice layer **30**. The silicon die **25** provides rigidity and in effect serves as a chassis for other portions of the printhead **16**. An ink feed channel **29** is formed in the die **25**. In one embodiment an ink feed channel **29** is formed for each printing element **18**. The thin film structure **27** is formed on the die **25**, and includes various passivation, insulation and conductive layers. A firing resistor **26** and conductive traces **28** (see FIGS. 9 and 17) are formed in the thin film structure **27** for each printing element **18**. The orifice layer **30** is formed on the thin film structure **27** opposite the die **25**. The orifice layer **30** has an exterior surface **34** which during operation faces a media sheet on which ink is to be printed. The orifice layer is either an integral layer formed with the thin film structure **27** or is a plate overlaid on the thin film structure. In some embodiments the flex circuit **20** overlays the orifice layer **30**. Nozzle chambers **36** and nozzle openings **38** are formed in the orifice layer **30**.

Each printing element **18** includes a firing resistor **26**, a nozzle chamber **36**, a nozzle opening **38**, and one or more fill

channels **40**. A center point of the firing resistor **26** defines a normal axis about which components of the printing element **18** are aligned. Specifically it is preferred that the firing resistor **26** be centered within the nozzle chamber **36** and be aligned with the nozzle opening **38**. The nozzle chamber **36** in one embodiment is frustoconical in shape. One or more fill channels **40** or vias are formed in the thin film structure **27** to couple the nozzle chamber **36** to the feed channel **29**. The fill channels **40** are encircled by the nozzle chamber lower periphery **43** so that the ink flowing through a given fill channel **40** flows exclusively into a corresponding nozzle chamber **36**.

In one embodiment there is one feed channel **29** for each printing element **18**. The feed channels **29** for a given set of rows **21** or **23** receive ink from a refill channel that is adjacent an interface between the substrate and the reservoir **14** (not shown). In an edge feed construction there is a refill channel **101** on each of two opposing side edges of the printhead. The feed channels **29** from one set of printing elements **21** are in communication with one refill channel, while the feed channels **29** from the other set of printing elements **23** are in communication with the other refill channel. In a center feed construction, there is a refill channel trough in communication with the feed channels. Such refill channel trough serves both sets of printing elements **21**, **23**. In one embodiment, the trough receives ink from a pen cartridge reservoir at an edge of the printhead. Thus, in the embodiments described the refill channel **101** does not extend through to the bottom surface **55** of the die **25**.

In an exemplary embodiment, the die **25** is a silicon die approximately 675 microns thick. Glass or a stable polymer are used in place of the silicon in alternative embodiments. The thin film structure **27** is formed by one or more passivation or insulation layers formed by silicon dioxide, silicon carbide, silicon nitride, tantalum, poly silicon glass, or another suitable material. The thin film structure also includes a conductive layer for defining the firing resistor and for defining the conductive traces. The conductive layer is formed by tantalum, tantalum-aluminum or another metal or metal alloy. In an exemplary embodiment the thin film structure is approximately 3 microns thick. The orifice layer **30** has a thickness of approximately 10 to 30 microns. The nozzle opening **38** has a diameter of approximately 10–30 microns. In an exemplary embodiment the firing resistor **26** is approximately square with a length on each side of approximately 10–30 microns. The base surface **43** of the nozzle chamber **36** supporting the firing resistor **26** has a diameter approximately twice the length of the resistor **26**. In one embodiment an anisotropic silicon etch defines 54° wall angles for the feed slot **29**. Although exemplary dimensions and angles are given, such dimensions and angles may vary for alternative embodiments.

Single-Side Fabrication

For naming convention purposes the die **25** has two sides, a top side **19** and a bottom side **55**. The top side defines a top surface and the bottom side defines a bottom surface. For a rectilinear die **25**, the die **25** also includes four edges extending between the top side and bottom side. The shape and number of edges of the die may vary in alternative embodiments. According to the invention, a monolithic inkjet printhead **16** is formed with fabrication processes acting from a single side of the substrate. In some embodiments the fabrication processes also act from an edge during at least one step of the fabrication. According to the invention, however, the fabrication processes need not act

from the bottom side of the die **25**. The term substrate as used herein refers to the in-process structure of the die **25** and thin film structure **27**, and when present, the orifice layer **30**.

Starting with a planar die **25**, a layer of field oxide **31** is applied (e.g., grown) to a first side **19**. The field oxide layer **25** then is masked and etched as shown in FIGS. **4** and **5** to delimit areas **33** for respective feed channels. In addition a membrane region **39** is formed within each feed channel area **33**. The feed channel area **33** extends from an edge **35** of the die **25** toward an opposite edge **37**. Once the feed channel is etched in the area **33** at a later stage, the feed channel **29** will extend from the side edge **35** toward the opposite edge **37**. The resulting printhead is to be an edge feed printhead with ink entering the feed channel **29** from the reservoir **14** at the edge **35** (see FIG. **3**). A shelf is formed at the edge and serves as the refill channel **101**.

The membrane region **39** occurs within the feed channel area **33** and marks regions of the field oxide to remain overlaying the corresponding feed channel **29**. At this stage in the fabrication there is no feed channel etched into the die **25**, just an area **33** delimited by the field oxide layer **31**.

The field oxide is a first layer of the thin film structure **27**. With the field oxide layer **31** patterned as desired, additional layers of the thin film structure **27** are applied to the same side **19** of the die **25** having the field oxide **31**. The additional layers are patterned to form firing resistors **26**, wiring lines **28** and passivation **45** as shown in FIGS. **6-8**. Deposition, masking and etching processes as known in the art are used to apply and pattern the firing resistors **26**, wiring lines **28** and passivation material **45**. In one embodiment the firing resistors **26** are formed of tantalum-aluminum and the wiring lines **28** are formed of aluminum. In another embodiment different or additional conductive metals, alloys or stacks of metals and/or alloys are used. FIG. **6** shows a plan view of a portion of the printhead **16**. The entire surface of the substrate is covered with passivation material **45** other than the areas labeled as the die **25**. In FIG. **6** the wiring lines **28** and firing resistor **26** are shown hidden underlying the passivation layer **45**. At this stage of the fabrication, the feed channel **29** still has not been etched in the area **33**.

With the firing resistors **26** and wiring lines **28** patterned, the next step is to etch the feed channel **29** and the fill channels **40**. An etchant is applied to the top side **19**. The die **25** is etched using tetra-methyl ammonium hydroxide, potassium hydroxide or another anisotropic silicon etchant which acts upon the exposed die **25** regions and not upon the passivation **45**. In one embodiment the etchant works upon the <100> plane of the silicon die to etch the silicon at an angle. The etching process continues with the silicon etched away downward at an angle until the angled lines intersect at a given depth. The result is a triangular trench for the feed channel **29** as shown in FIGS. **9-11**. At this stage a trench has been created in the die **25** using a process acting from the top side **19** of the die **25**. The trench defines the feed channel **29**.

At this stage of the fabrication the feed channels **29**, the fill channels **40**, the firing resistors **26** and the wiring lines **28** have been formed, but the nozzle chambers **36** (see FIG. **3**) have not yet been formed. The nozzle chambers **36** are to be formed with an orifice plate, with an orifice film or by direct imaging. For any of such methods the presence of the feed channel **29** and fill channels **40** can adversely impact the formation of the nozzle chambers **36** due to the varied topography introduced by such voids. Such voids are filed

up to enable continued processing from the top surface. Thus, according to an aspect of this invention, a material **50** of photoresist or polyimide is spun and baked onto the substrate as shown in FIG. **12**. The material **50** fills in the feed channel **29** and fill channels **40** and covers the passivation layer **45**. Next, a chemical-mechanical polishing process is applied to the substrate to remove the material **50** in areas other than the feed channels **29** and fill channels **40**, as shown in FIGS. **13** and **14**. In one embodiment an O₂ plasma etch also is performed so that the filler material **50** is removed without removing the passivation material **45**. The result is a planar surface with bumps of passivation material **45** over the firing resistors **26** (see FIGS. **13** and **14**). The top side **19** of the substrate now has areas of passivation material **45** and filler material **50**. At this stage of the fabrication the substrate is ready for processes to form the nozzle chambers **36**.

In one embodiment (see FIG. **15**) a frustoconical sacrificial mandrel **52** is formed over each resistor **26** in the shape of the desired nozzle chamber. Such sacrificial mandrel **52** is formed by depositing a suitable material, such as photoresist or polyimide, then patterning and etching the material to the desired shape. Next an orifice layer **30** is applied as shown in FIG. **16** to a thickness flush with the sacrificial mandrel **52**. In one embodiment the orifice layer is applied by an electroplating process, in which the substrate is dipped into an electroplating tank. Material (e.g., nickel, gold) forms on the substrate around the sacrificial mandrel **52**. Other deposition processes also may be used, but may be accompanied by an additional polishing step to level the layer **30** to the sacrificial mandrel **52**. Next, the sacrificial mandrel **52** is etched or dissolved away from the orifice layer **30**, leaving the remaining nozzle chamber **36** as shown in FIG. **17**. In the same step or in another etching step, the filler material **50** is etched out of the fill channels **40** and the feed channels **29** resulting in a printhead **16** as shown in FIGS. **3** and **17**. The filler material **50** is etched from the top side **19** of the substrate or from the top side **19** and the edge fill side **35** of the substrate. For either case, the fabrication processes do not act from the bottom surface **55** (see FIGS. **3** and **17**) opposite side **19**.

Although the nozzle chambers **36** are described as being formed by applying a sacrificial mandrel and orifice layer then etching out the sacrificial mandrel, other processes also may be used. In one alternative embodiment, an orifice film is applied to the substrate as the substrate appears in FIG. **14**. Patterning and etching processes then are performed to define the nozzle chamber **36**. An etching process as described above then is performed to remove the filler material **50** from the feed channel(s) **29** and fill channels **40**. In still another embodiment material is spun onto the substrate, masked and exposed to form the nozzle chambers **36**. Again an etching process as described above is performed afterward to remove the filler material **50** from the feed channels **29** and fill channels **40**.

Upon completion there is a printhead **16** without any ink channel openings in the bottom surface of the bottom side **55**. More specifically, no portion of the bottom side **55** has been removed for ink channel openings.

Although preferred embodiments of the invention have been illustrated and described, various alternatives, modifications and equivalents may be used. Therefore, the foregoing description should not be taken as limiting the scope of the inventions which are defined by the appended claims.

What is claimed is:

1. A monolithic inkjet printhead having a plurality of printing elements, the printhead comprising:

a die having a first surface, an opposite second surface, and an edge surface extending from the first surface to the second surface, wherein the first surface defines a recessed area, the recessed area extending along the first surface from an edge surface inward away from the edge surface, the recessed area serving as a feed channel that channels ink toward at least a multiple of printing elements of said plurality of printing elements, and wherein said feed channel does not extend to said second surface;

a plurality of first layers overlaying the first surface of the die, wherein the plurality first layers are patterned to define a plurality of firing resistors, wiring lines and ink fill channels;

a second layer overlaying the plurality of first layers, wherein the second layer has a pattern defining a plurality of nozzle chambers, each one of the plurality of nozzle chambers aligned over at least one firing resistor of the plurality of firing resistors, each one of the plurality of nozzle chambers having a nozzle opening;

wherein each one of the plurality of printing elements comprises a firing resistor and nozzle chamber and a fill channel, the fill channel extending from the nozzle chamber to the feed channel, and wherein for each one of the plurality of printing elements a respective wiring line is conductively coupled to the firing resistor of said one printing element.

2. An inkjet pen, comprising:

a pen body defining an internal reservoir for storing ink;

a monolithic inkjet printhead having a plurality of printing elements, the printhead comprising:

a die having a first surface, an opposite second surface, and an edge surface extending from the first surface to the second surface, wherein the first surface defines a recessed area, the recessed area extending along the first surface from an edge surface inward away from the edge surface, the recessed area serving as a feed channel that channels ink toward at least a multiple of printing elements of said plurality of printing elements, and wherein said feed channel does not extend to said second surface;

a plurality of first layers overlaying the first surface of the die, wherein the plurality first layers are patterned to define a plurality of firing resistors, wiring lines and ink fill channels; and

a second layer overlaying the plurality of first layers, wherein the second layer has a pattern defining a plurality of nozzle chambers, each one of the plurality of nozzle chambers aligned over at least one firing

resistor of the plurality of firing resistors, each one of the plurality of nozzle chambers having a nozzle opening; and

wherein each one of the plurality of printing elements comprises a firing resistor and nozzle chamber and a fill channel, the fill channel extending from the nozzle chamber to the feed channel, and wherein for each one of the plurality of printing elements a respective wiring line is conductively coupled to the firing resistor of said one printing element.

3. A printhead comprising:

a substrate having a first surface, an opposite second surface, and an edge surface coupling the first and second surfaces, wherein the edge surface has an interface, wherein the substrate has a first fluid channel fluidically coupled with the interface; and

a thin film structure disposed over the substrate, the thin film structure including a heating element and a firing chamber disposed over the heating element, wherein the thin film structure has a second fluid channel disposed therethrough, wherein the second fluid channel fluidically couples the first fluid channel with the firing chamber,

wherein the first fluid channel substantially extends from the interface to the second fluid channel, and is substantially located between the thin film structure and a recessed surface of the substrate.

4. The printhead of claim 3 wherein the first fluid channel is a refill channel.

5. A print cartridge comprising:

a fluid reservoir;

a substrate having an interface between the fluid reservoir and the substrate, and having a first fluid channel fluidically coupled with the fluid reservoir; and

a thin film structure disposed over the substrate, the thin film structure including a heating element and a firing chamber disposed over the heating element,

wherein the thin film structure has a second fluid channel disposed therethrough, wherein the second fluid channel fluidically couples the first fluid channel with the firing chamber,

wherein the first fluid channel substantially extends from the interface to the second fluid channel, and is substantially located between the thin film structure and a recessed surface of the substrate.

6. The print cartridge of claim 5 wherein the first fluid channel is a refill channel.

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